

Standards for a High-Quality IRF

The comments from your Individual Review Form will serve as the basis of the panel discussion, serve as the documentation of your assessment, and are provided to the applicant as feedback from the peer review process. The comments may also be released to the public in response to official Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. The completeness and quality of these comments, as well as the alignment between your Ratings and comments are extremely important. As such, they must be appropriate, useful, and clearly correspond with the Program Design elements that External Reviewers were asked to assess. Provided below is guidance on *writing meaningful comments* is provided below; as well as some example *sentence starters* to start you in the right direction with constructing helpful comments.

Writing Meaningful Comments

- Limit your assessment to information that was found in the reviewed application. *Do not include information from outside sources, the applicant's known reputation; or compare the application to another applicant, etc.*
- Present evaluative language instead of a summary of details from the application. *Tell what you thought about the proposal, give your assessment of what is strong or weak about the application, how does this detail make it strong, how well did the information that the applicant included respond to the requirements?*
- Phrase deficiencies in the application appropriately
Avoid making suggestions for improvement, resist the urge to tell the applicant what would have made the proposal better. Rather phrase what was lacking, and how this lacking affected the proposal.

is evaluative and appropriate with no suggestions for a “better proposal”

- No inflammatory or inappropriate statements
Exercise care in how you articulate your assessment. Do not ask questions in your comments, avoid harsh tones, or overly broad statements. Do not refer to the “grant writer” for the application, etc.
 - ie. Why did the applicant not respond to the majority of the Criteria?*
 - The training plan was virtually non-existent.*
 - The applicant never clearly stated who the target population was!*
 - The grant writer was slick and creative, but there was little substance to the proposal.*
- Sentences are complete, with correct grammar and spelling.
Especially “AmeriCorps”folks. ☺ Use spell check, and reread the assessment after you have completed it to ensure that it is clear and well written.
- Comments address the AmeriCorps Selection Criteria only, and do not comment on random aspects of the proposal.

- Comments should be limited to the strengths and weaknesses of the application, and should utilize the indicators (+) (-) for clarity. Take care to ensure that the strengths and weaknesses do not contradict each other. If there are strong and weak aspects of a Criterion that you would like to comment on, phrase the comment appropriately. *ie. (+/-) While the applicants proposed a comprehensive activity to engage Americorps Members and create a positive service experience, the proposed leader of these activities was one of the AmeriCorps members, instead of a qualified instructor or motivational figure.*
- The selected Rating should align with the comments provided for each section.
- Comments for Criterion VI specifically address the linkage of the Program Design elements, and are not a *summary* of comments on the previous Selection Criteria
- Applicant Feedback Summary contains balanced appropriate feedback. Summary comments should be placed in this section—the comments should not be brand new, but should be the Strengths and Weaknesses from previous Criteria that had the greatest weight on the overall assessment and Rating.

Characteristics of High Quality Comments

- Keep comments focused on significant strengths and weaknesses.(that have an impact on the selected Rating)
 - A strength becomes significant when it shows that the applicant has clearly demonstrated both an understanding of, and the ability to address, a key issue in program implementation or management.
 - A weakness becomes significant when a criterion is not addressed at all, or is addressed poorly causing concern about the applicant's ability to successfully implement the proposed project.
- Significant strengths and weaknesses must relate to the Selection Criteria as specified in the Notice and described in the IRF Guidance Document.
- The difference is clear between comments based on fact and those based on professional judgment. (Both are helpful, but the distinction is necessary.)
- Comments include evidence or an evaluation, rather than a reiteration or summary of what is in the application.

Characteristics of Low Quality Comments

- There is little or no relevant information to connect the statement to a particular application. The comment is generic and can be read to apply to any application.
- Comment includes a large portion of information that was copied directly from the application.
- There is little or no relevant information to indicate overall quality of the section.
- The sentence is long and confusing, so that the assessment is altogether unclear.
- There is little documentation or no evidence provided about what was strong/weak, or how it was good/bad.
- Comments are ambiguous and not clearly related to the Selection Criteria.
- Comments contain judgments that are outside the scope of responsibility of the Reviewer (for example, commenting that the program has received more than its fair share of funding).

- Comments contain questions, page numbers, suggestions or recommendations for improvements.
- Comments are facetious, pejorative, or otherwise inappropriate or unprofessional.

Sentence Starters

The sentence starters below may be useful in forming constructive review comments in the Individual Reviewer Forms. Keep in mind that the Sentence Starters are not exclusive statements, and that CNCS is neither prescribing them nor limiting you to their use. The purpose is to provide you with resources to help you succeed in your review.

Problem(s) identified

1. Community needs to be addressed are compelling and well-documented/missing... as evidenced by the following...
2. The target community (does not) appears to have been effectively involved in planning (or implementing) the program in the following way/because...
3. Proposed activities (do not) address the identified needs...to support their assertion that...
4. The applicant demonstrates previous relevant success as evidenced by.../The applicant does not make the case that they have been successful ...
5. The tutoring program includes/does not appear to include the following elements and appears to be thorough/complete/sufficient/well-planned/insufficient/lacking in detail/incomplete, etc...
6. The applicant presents limited information about the need to be addressed...they propose to...but the need was not substantiated because...
7. The applicant presents a clear and feasible/an ambiguous...

Ways in which AmeriCorps members are particularly well-suited to deliver the solution

1. The plan for recruiting and managing volunteers is clear and strong because... The plan for recruiting and managing volunteers is inadequate/ it lacked/was missing_____
2. AmeriCorps members will be recruited using... which appear to be effective because...
3. The training plan develops and trains the members by/through...and is effective because...
4. The training plan does not address developing and training members/The training plan does not appear to be consistent with the service activities/member needs/community needs as the plan did not describe...
5. The applicant outlines a feasible and effective member supervision plan as evidenced by...
6. Member Supervision information is missing/appears to be inadequate because...
7. Through participating in the program, participants will develop the following knowledge, skills and attitudes... These objectives are clear and will promote an ethic of service and civic responsibility because...
8. It is unclear if members will develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes that the program expects from them ...
9. The applicant has been successful in recruiting, enrolling and retaining members as evidence by ...
10. The applicant presented a member development and training plan, that did not detail ...
11. The applicant presents a well-rounded training plan for members incorporating...

12. The applicant proposes training activities that are (not) well aligned with...

Anticipated outcome(s)

1. The applicant has a realistic plan for building the capacity/does not present a plan of the organization and the community to sustain the proposed service activities after the grant ends. Key features of this plan are...
2. The absence of information on... makes it difficult to assess the impact of the program in ...
3. The potential impact of the program on the community is well-demonstrated in the inclusive...
4. The applicant presents a plan to sustain the proposed service activities in the community after the grant ends. Key features of this plan are...
5. This program supported the claim that they are likely to be successful through...
6. The activities proposed reflect a comprehensive program model that...
7. Though the applicant has an innovative approach to...they are lacking...
8. The applicant meets minimal standards in their response, as it was lacking...

Solution(s) that will be carried out by AmeriCorps members and community volunteers

1. The members' roles are (not) well defined and (not) compatible with the program design because...
2. The plan supports/does not appear to support the program objectives because...
3. The applicant proposes a program that seems to be a sustainable endeavor as evidenced by...
4. It is unclear if the program will promote an ethic of service and civic responsibility because...
5. The applicant presents a satisfactory approach to enhance the capacity of key local organizations to ... These partnerships include the following schools, (or faith and community organizations, homeland security organizations, neighborhood watch organizations, or civic associations) who will be involved in the following ways/roles...
6. The applicant has a realistic plan for building the capacity/does not present a plan to build the capacity of other organizations...
7. The applicant has built/does not make the case to have built partnerships with the community groups and residents who will be essential to the success of the service activities. For example...